

I DON'T UNDERSTAND YOUR SERVICE!

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BY K. D. MACKENZIE

WHAT SERVICE? The service which people say they cannot understand is almost always the Holy Communion. So the first thing that has to be said in answer to this complaint is that the service in question is *not* ours. It is no invention of man but it is the way in which Jesus Christ himself taught us to worship God. If that is once made clear we can go on and try to explain anything that may seem difficult, or unnatural, or complicated about the service or about the way it is conducted in "high" churches; but as long as people go on talking as though it were some kind of service which we have made up for ourselves, we shall make no progress in trying to clear up their difficulties.

THE LORD'S SERVICE

Christ said very little to his followers about their gathering for worship: but the two things he did say are very important. (1) He taught us that wherever two or three are gathered together in his name he himself is really present in their midst. Therefore it is a clear duty to "gather together" frequently, and so gain this great blessing. (2) On the last evening of his earthly life he commanded his disciples to do what he himself had just done in the Upper Room. This action is very clearly described for us in the Gospels. He took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples, bidding them eat it, and saying, mysteriously, that it was his Body. Then he took a cup of wine and water, blessed it, and gave it to them, bidding them drink it, and saying that it was his Blood. That is the form of service which he laid down, and those actions and nothing else are the necessary acts of worship prescribed for Christian people. From the rest of the New Testa-

ment it is quite clear that from the beginning of Christianity it was taught as a duty that we must assemble ourselves together for worship, and that the central act of worship every Sunday is the carrying out of the actions commanded by our Lord. Psalms and Bible reading and prayers were a kind of introduction to the service, but the central point of it was the solemn moment when the apostle, or bishop, or priest, blessed and broke the Bread and blessed the Cup, and distributed the Body and Blood of Christ to the communicants.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

If anyone says, "I don't understand that," the best answer is to say, "Who can?" The Holy Communion *is* mysterious, as the whole Christian religion is mysterious: but our Lord did not say "Understand this," but simply "Do it." All we need is faith in our Lord's words, and readiness to obey his command. He said "This is my Body," and our part is to believe him: he said, "Do this," and our part is to do it.

But, of course, he would not wish us just to go through the service as a kind of formal ceremony, without attaching any meaning to it. Mysterious though it is, it is full of the richest spiritual meaning.

(1) To begin with, it is a memorial service. This does not mean *merely* a service to remind us of Christ. It does that; but the real object of the service is to bring us into living touch with God. We do remind ourselves of Christ's death and resurrection and ascension into heaven, but with these things in mind we come to give ourselves to God and to share in the blessings which our Lord has won for us.

(2) When our Lord came to earth, he took real human Flesh and Blood, in which he suffered, died and rose again. The Blessed Sacrament is not a mere reminder of this; but through it we are brought into the very presence of Christ who is both God and Man, and whose Flesh and Blood are with us when the Bread and Wine have been consecrated. This is the richest fulfilment of his

promise to be in the midst of those who gather together in his name.

(3) When our Lord died on the cross his Blood was all shed out from his Body. No doubt that is the reason why he gives himself to us now under the separate forms of bread and wine. The Holy Communion service is specially a memorial of the Blood-shedding of our Lord. When he died he made his supreme act of obedience to the heavenly Father, and in this service we have a kind of continuation of his one all-sufficient sacrifice. We can devote ourselves afresh to God in union with that great self-sacrifice.

(4) But Christ is not now dead but alive. If it is indeed his Body and Blood which are given to us in the Holy Sacrament, it must mean the Body and Blood of the living Christ. When the bread and wine are consecrated it is like opening a window into heaven through which we can see Christ our heavenly Priest pleading for us and leading our worship.

A VERY SIMPLE SERVICE

It is quite true that there is something deeply mysterious at the heart of the Holy Communion. It could not be otherwise. Christianity *is* mysterious. What our Lord did and suffered is mysterious, and what he taught us to do as his memorial naturally shares that mysterious character. But nothing could be simpler than the actual words and structure of the service. If you will look at your prayer-book, you will see that this is true. There is practically nothing in any of the prayers that a child could not grasp and understand. It is indeed strange that there are people who say that they can understand Morning Prayer and follow it, but that they find the Communion Service difficult. The Psalms and Canticles which are sung at Morning and Evening Prayer *are* in many places really difficult to understand and make use of. There are very few of them in which we might not have to pull ourselves up and ask, "Now what exactly does that mean, and what am I to make of it?" Just compare that with the exquisite simplicity and straightforwardness of the Communion Service.

BUT IS IT A COMMUNION SERVICE?

We have not yet by any means finished with the difficulties and objections of the man who "does not understand the service." "I do not understand," he says, "how you can call it a Communion Service when nobody, or hardly anybody, goes up to receive the Communion."

The answer to this is really quite simple. It has been a standing order of good churchmanship from the earliest days that from a sense of reverence the Holy Communion should be the first food of the day. Therefore people who observe this rule almost always communicate in the early morning. Those who are present at 11 o'clock are not necessarily intending to communicate.

"But," says the objector, "What is the use of going to a Communion Service and not taking the Communion?" This is a very natural question, but again there is quite a simple answer to it. There are two sides to the service, and two purposes for which it is held. Both are taught very plainly in the Church Catechism which most of us learned as children. The first is "for a perpetual memorial of the sacrifice of the death of Christ": the second "for the strengthening and refreshing of our souls by the Body and Blood of Christ." The two purposes are very closely connected, but they are not the same. Just as those who cannot come to church often receive the Holy Communion in their own homes without attending the church service, so we may quite rightly attend the service without receiving Communion. The Holy Eucharist is not only a *sacrament* to be *received* but also a *sacrifice* to be *offered*. A sacrament is something which we receive from God: a sacrifice is something which we give to God. If for any reason we are not prepared to receive the sacrament that is no reason against attending church to offer him our sacrifice. The Holy Communion service is a great act of worship addressed to God, and the best possible opportunity for prayer and thanksgiving and adoration. That is why we ought to attend the service every Sunday, although the question of how often to communicate is left to our own conscience.

CEREMONIAL

There are still other things about the service which people say they cannot understand. These are really far less important than those which we have mentioned, but probably they draw quite as much attention to themselves. "I cannot understand this dressing up and bowing and scraping, walking about, and burning incense." In other words, there seems to be too much ceremonial and outward show.

Now it may be freely acknowledged that many people do find a full ceremonial disturbing. It seems to spoil the simplicity of the service, and they dislike it very much in consequence.

There are, however, two things to remember. One is that the object of religious ceremonial is not to make the worshipper feel uplifted, but to show forth the majesty of God. The other is that even if we do wish for a simple service (and there is no harm in that) it does not mean that it ought to be just bare and dull and unadorned. Just as we use music in our services for the glory of God, we may rightly also use beauty and colour. After all, the Church of England is a part of the great Catholic Church, and there are certain outward forms which have been in use for many centuries in the Church. These forms are not merely beautiful in themselves, but also show what we are and what we believe. This must be borne in mind when people talk about "dressing up," or "bowing and scraping." It is not necessary, or even possible, to have a grand ceremonial in every church—"walking about" and "burning incense"—but our way of conducting the service ought to show that we believe the true, ancient and historical doctrine about the Sacrament. It is only right and natural that there should be a distinctive uniform for the priest when he is carrying out the highest act of his ministry. We all wear different clothes for different occasions. No one would think of going to court in his everyday clothes. There is a great difference between services like Morning and Evening Prayer on the one hand and the Holy Communion on the other; and that is why the priest wears the ancient vestments when he ministers at the altar. At less important services he need wear no vestment except his linen surplice.

When people talk about "bowing and scraping" they mean that it is customary to show belief in the real presence of our Lord by bodily acts of reverence. But why not? If there is indeed a special presence of Christ under the signs of bread and wine it would surely be irreverent *not* to bend the knee. Someone once said that he did not see any very great difference between Jesus Christ and any other great man like Shakespeare. "Well," answered another, "I think there is this difference. If Shakespeare were to come into this room now, no doubt we should all stand up: but if Jesus Christ were to enter there is not one of us but would kneel down." On the same principle, when Christ's minister comes into the church it is usual to stand up: but when we pass the altar, which is Christ's throne, we bow our heads; and when we approach or handle the Holy Sacrament, we bend our knee. That is why there is "bowing and scraping": it is because we believe in the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament.

Any further elaboration of the outward dignity of the service is not in any way *necessary*; but it does seem right that the worship of God should be conducted with as much dignity as possible. How much is possible varies in different churches. But just as in a great cathedral there is usually splendid and elaborate music which no one would dream of having in a village church; so with other things. There are quite good reasons for a certain amount of variety between one church and another. In a large church where there are several clergymen it is possible to have one grand and splendid service every Sunday morning as well as other simpler ones: but in most churches it is neither possible nor even perhaps desirable. So there are not really very many churches in which there is much "walking about" or burning incense. Where these things are done the object of them is to make the service as dignified and splendid as possible. They are done chiefly for the glory of God, though they do also help us to lift our hearts and join in the worship of the angels.

In a great service there are a number of people employed. Besides the priest and the choir there may be other clergymen and laymen each with his own part to perform. In that case there must be a good deal of moving about. By very careful practice the whole is made as beautiful as possible, and this constant move-

ment is part of the beauty of the service just as much as the changing music, one appeals to the eye, the other to the ear. In the same way the burning of incense is not only a symbol of prayer and of sacrifice (as we see in both the New and the Old Testaments), but also a very lovely thing in itself.

These things do give to many people a wonderful feeling of the majesty of God. They are an attempt to make our worship as like as possible to the worship of heaven. (See chapters 4 and 5 of the Revelation of St. John). Of course, if we are determined to dislike them, we shall find them merely irritating. But it is a pity to let that happen. Perhaps we ourselves prefer something simpler: no one can blame us for that. But as we come to understand the meaning and purpose of worship more fully we shall trouble less about the exact way in which the service is performed. We have every right to choose a simple service rather than an elaborate one if we find it suits us better; but we must not let our personal taste put us off our duty; and it is a *duty* to worship God Sunday by Sunday in the Holy Communion service, because that is the way that Christ appointed.

A duty? Yes; but also something far better than a duty. In this holy service we are admitted into the very presence of Christ, our King and Priest. He is there to receive our homage, and to lead us into the holy atmosphere of heavenly worship. He is there to present himself in sacrifice for our sins and shortcomings. He is there in order that we may give ourselves afresh to God in union with his own self-sacrifice. Surely the invitation is enough; can it be that we need a command? The command is there: "*Do this*"; but is it not much better to remember that word of Christ, "Many prophets and kings have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them, and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them?" It is a duty, but how much better to say, "Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift!"